DIDEROT AND LITERARY AESTHETICS: THE TESTIMONY OF THE CORRESPONDENCE

It has only been within the last twenty years that researchers have been able to conduct solid investigations into the Diderot correspondence. Thanks to the indefatigable labours of Georges Roth and Jean Varloot, scholars now have access to the largest number of Diderot letters ever available (more than twice the number formally available) and a critical apparatus provided by the co-editors which facilitates research. This explains, in part, why Benoît Melançon list 87 items in his recent bibliography on the Diderot correspondence, the vast majority of which date from the 1970s and 1980s. In his summation

1 I would like to thank the Killam Foundation of The Canada Council for its generous financial assistance, which provided funding for research on this paper — which forms part of a larger project on the history of the correspondence genre in eighteenth century France.

2 We have no intention of deprecating Lester G. Krakeur’s [Crocker] La Correspondance de Diderot: Son intérêt documentaire, psychologique et littéraire (New York, 1939). His is a pioneering work of analysis and synthesis but it appeared more than thirty years before the publication of the Georges Roth—Jean Varloot definitive edition of the Diderot correspondence issued in Paris between 1955 and 1970. This accounts for the somewhat restricted perspective in Crocker’s volume as well as certain lacunae. There is, for example, no separate section in Crocker’s book on Diderot’s aesthetic preoccupations although the issue is dealt with in other parts of his study. The Roth—Varloot edition contains, moreover, more than double the number of letters that Crocker worked with.

statement at the end of his introduction to the bibliography, Melançon suggests that new avenues of research on the Diderot correspondence might be directed towards the nature of dialogue in the letters and the "oral" aspect of his prose.⁴

While this is undoubtedly a worthwhile suggestion, a perusal of the Diderot correspondence suggests that there are still more traditional source streams in the letters that remain to be tapped, analyzed and fine-tuned.⁵ The whole area of aesthetics is a case in point. While much has been written about Diderot's interest in the plastic arts, literature and drama reflected in his published works,⁶ relatively little has been done on the loom of aesthetics in the letters.⁷ This is somewhat surprising given the hundreds of letters in which Diderot discourses either directly or tangentially on aesthetic questions. The reason for this is obvious; scholars have traditionally been hesitant in using a writer's correspondence for anything but collateral testimony. They have been reluctant, therefore, to approach letters as an ensemble worthy of scrutiny in its own right. It is our view that letters merit the same attention as the discursive writings of a famous author.

⁴ Ibid., p. 157.
⁵ Michel Delon in "Editer la correspondance," in Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century 254 (1988), pp. 399-411 shows that since 1970, the publication date of the last volume of the Roth—Varloot edition, new letters have surfaced and whole new areas of research possibilities have opened up.
⁷ The Melançon bibliography shows that recent studies on the Diderot correspondence focus on several main themes — technical questions on texts of specific letters, Diderot's relationship with Sophie Volland and other correspondents, the conception of love, the philosophical matrix and the narrative art in dialogue and conversation.